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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR VISITS NORTHERN LUZON TO DEEPEN US PHILIPPINE  
RELATIONS AND HIGHLIGHT INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY

11. SUMMARY. Ambassador Kristie Kenney visited Cabanatuan, Tarlac, and Baguio in the northern Luzon provinces of Nueva Ecija, Tarlac and Benguet March 8-9. Ambassador Kenney focused on deepening relations with northern Luzon interlocutors and highlighting historical and cultural ties between the Philippines and the U.S. The trip commemorated International Women's Day with a visit to former president Corazon Aquino at her presidential library/museum, and representational events gathering prominent women leaders from education, government and NGOs. Events in the summer capital of Baguio demonstrated the continuing value of the Embassy Residence there as a forward base for regional outreach. END SUMMARY.

12. Ambassador Kenney began her trip in Cabanatuan, at the site of a World War Two Prisoner Of War camp. Over 3,000 U.S. servicemen died at the hands of Japanese captors at this camp. US Rangers, in partnership with Filipino units, conducted a successful raid in 1945 to free the remaining 500 prisoners; an operation depicted in the recent movie, "The Great Raid." Little remains of the actual facility, but plaques have been erected in memory of the dead, and the American Battlefield Monuments Commission ensures that the memorials and grounds are maintained.

13. Ambassador Kenney also visited the International Broadcasting Bureau's Philippines Transmitting Station in Tinang, Tarlac. Eighty-seven foreign nationals and 5 American staff together maintain a USD 5.4 million operation that broadcasts to the South East Asian region in multiple languages. The 2,300 acre facility has opened unused land adjacent to the transmitting antennae to local farmers for cultivation, and its community action program comprises a number of innovative initiatives aimed at supporting the mostly poor neighboring communities with education and daycare, medical and emergency aid, and potable water. These innovative programs build goodwill with neighbors and have helped create a network of eyes and ears that informally provide security for the station against robbers and insurgents.

14. Ambassador Kenney paid a courtesy call on former President of the Philippines, Corazon Aquino, and toured the Aquino Center museum in Tarlac City. The center is modeled on the Kennedy presidential library in Boston, the city where Mrs. Aquino and her martyred husband had sought asylum for several years from the regime of Ferdinand Marcos. Mrs. Aquino served as president from 1986 to 1992, succeeding Marcos. She had previously led a three-year campaign for greater political freedom following the assassination of her late husband and former Senator Benigno "Ninoy" Aquino, Jr. Mrs. Aquino confirmed that she and her family were almost fully engaged in supporting the bid by her son, Congressman Benigno "Noynoy" Aquino III for a seat in the Philippines Senate.

15. On the evening of March 8, Ambassador Kenney hosted the first of several events at the U.S. Embassy Residence in Baguio City. Baguio was established in the early 1900s as the highland summer capital of the Philippines. The residence was opened in 1940 for what was then the U.S. High Commissioner for the Philippines Commonwealth, and was later the site of the surrender of Japanese forces in the Philippines at the end of World War II.

¶16. Baguio remains the official "summer capital" of the Philippines, but is better known as a major regional educational center, boasting five major universities and the joint-services Philippine Military Academy. The city has built on the highly-educated population to become a burgeoning high-tech hub, home to U.S. companies Texas Instruments and aviation supplier Moog Instruments, as well as numerous call centers and back-room processing operations for U.S. and international firms. Today the residence is a valuable programming venue in Baguio, and is also available on a cost basis to USG employees for official and personal use.

¶17. The evening reception was an opportunity to deepen relations with over 100 Mission contacts from Baguio and the region. Guests included university administrators and faculty, a large contingent from the Philippine Military Academy (PMA) led by their Superintendent, and representatives from local NGO leaders. Also present were alumni of various State Department-funded programs, including the International Visitor Leadership Program, Fulbright, the Humphrey Fellowship program, and State/ECA American Studies institutes. A number of reporters, both local correspondents of Philippines national media and journalists from Baguio and northern Luzon news outlets also attended.

¶18. The following morning, March 9, as part of the Mission's celebration of International Women's Day, the Ambassador hosted a coffee for 25 women leaders from the Baguio area. Guests included presidents of local universities, local government officials, cultural figures, and NGO activists. Ferah Decano, a member of the city council of Dagupan (a medium-sized town in a neighboring province), provided a case study of the effectiveness of the International Visitor Leadership Program (IVLP). Ms. Decano participated in a FY-2006 program on local governance, focused on how cities can respond to challenges of crime and corruption. In the six months since her return she has drafted and - in the face of bitter opposition and threats of violence - secured enactment of an

ordinance that fights prostitution by focusing on the male customer.

The ordinance is modeled on a local law that Ms. Decano learned about during her IVLP stop in St. Louis. Ms. Decano has drafted a second ordinance she hopes to see enacted that will increase government transparency in her city.

¶19. Ambassador Kenney was interviewed March 9 at the Residence by ABS-CBN TV's northern and central Luzon station, and the taped segment appeared that night on "TV Patrol Northern Luzon." Questions focused on the Ambassador's International Women's Day visit to northern Luzon, on the Department's recently released Report on human rights practices in the Philippines, and on prospects for increased U.S. investment in the Baguio area.

¶10. These events demonstrated the continuing dynamism of Baguio and the surrounding regions, and the value of the Baguio Residence as a forward venue for Mission outreach to northern Luzon. Guests were deeply impressed by the attractiveness and historic significance of the building. Feedback received during and after the reception and coffee indicates that the events had a positive impact on the attendees and generated a significant reservoir of goodwill that will be useful for future Mission outreach in Baguio and the region.

KENNEY